cracks in pomo: the zine

SUMMER 2024 vol. ii

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volume ii

Summer 2024

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Wtf is going on here????

For those of you who have been following us since the beginning, we gotta hand it to you. From our early days on WordPress, to our Patheos era, to the dawn of the pod and Substack, to the first print edition of the zine last summer, we've undergone quite the evolution. And unfortunately for you, we haven't gotten any less weird, esoteric, or niche. Cracks in Postmodernity has managed to continue churning out content that confuses, provokes, enrages, and just when you think you've got us figured out, throws you for a loop once again.

Clearly, the content in these pages are not for the faint of heart (seriously, you might just get some time carved off your stint in purgatory if you read it cover to cover). Rather, we hope that what you'll find in these pages will help you to scavenge a path through the weeds whose mission is to ensnare you on your way through the savagery of our current postmodern jungle, and to get some light cracking through to the dark forest floor on which we must tread.

In a word, this zine is for you searchers. It is for you people who seem to make no sense to anyone…not even to yourself, ridden as you are by complexity and paradoxes. It's for those who are tired of sincere cringe-posters—whose self-serious, puritanical moral code makes you gag, and whose saccharine sentimentality makes you feel like a prediabetic. But this is also for those who are tired of swallowing the irony pill, startled as you are like a pre-menopausal church lady by the nihilistic shit-posting, uncharitable tomfoolery, and fascist-adjacent musings of those who have already OD-ed on it.

What you hold in your hands is for those who are looking for a refreshing breeze of substance in the desert that is "the scene." It is especially for the trad queers and queer trads. No, not gays who go to Latin Mass (though they are certainly welcome to read this publication), but those who are *queer* in the traditional sense of the term, as in "strange," "odd," or "slightly ill"...and for those who are *trad* in the queer sense of the term, as in feening to imbibe the insights offered by those throughout history who–like yourself–desperately desired to know if there is an ultimate point to it all.

It's for the devout Midwesterner who doesn't exactly fit in with his old skool family because he rather strike up conversations about Huysmans than Bishop Barron's latest video. It's for the M2F who wonders whether the public's disdain for transracialism is a matter of ethical integrity or cognitive dissonance, as it is for the little twink who thinks Donald Trump is just as skilled a drag queen as RuPaul and Wendy Williams, as well as the grad school dropout

who was going to write her dissertation on "Three Theories of Applause: Ratzinger, Warhol, and Gaga." It's for the tradwife who is too busy working a full-time job and taking her kids to get hot dogs at Costco after daily Mass to hand make floor-length skirts, and for the chad-dad who is too busy running his small gym and giving free powerlifting coaching sessions to his neighbors to be posting neopagan fodder from an anon account on X. It's for the literature professor who wonders if a university posting tweets advocating for the oppressed using hashtags du jour counts as progress as much as paying its adjuncts a living wage does, and for the millennial who is adamantly opposed to North American customs like blasting air conditioning and tipping waiters, but is too committed to his family and local community to get an email job and uproot himself to the Mediterranean.

The diversity of our contributors and readership is not the fruit of some training program concocted by bureaucratic elites in some far-away boardroom, but of an ecumenical spirit that seeks to recognize that which we share in common as human beings.

We've been accused variously of trying to "appeal to all of [our] bases" and of not taking a definitive stand on hot button issues because we "have no backbone." Perhaps this may be true…perhaps we are guilty as charged. But perhaps it is also true that the world today is too divided by petty, inconsequential "culture war" battles…with expending energy fixating more on being–in the words of Ms. Lauryn Hill–*right* (that is, self-righteous…projecting our unresolved Laschian psychological complexes onto others) than on actually being *righteous*. We are too caught up with problems that have little to do with our concrete, day-to-day affairs…or with the great questions that plague us at the depths of our souls. Meanwhile, hidden power-players continue to reap the benefits of our distraction, taking advantage of the divided masses who waste their time bickering over who's on the right side of history, rather than confronting the sinister intentions of those whose mission is to "divide and conquer."

This volume that you are about to (a) skim through (b) read voraciously and savor every word of (c) just look at the pictures in or (d) ostentatiously display on your coffee table to make your guests think you are more cultured than you actually are aims to incite you to think about some deep ish—death, beauty, suffering, evil, love, justice—as well as things as spicy as which perfume will make you feel like a Manhattan debutante, and in which Bushwick bar's bathroom you can experience both sacred and profane encounters.

As devotees of paradox, it is our aim to make you weep over the follies of being a fallen creature in our pomo world, humbling you to the point of bringing you to your knees begging the Creator for mercy, and ultimately laughing at your vain attempts to "get your life together," and to rejoice jubilantly with gratitude for the gift of what Brother Cornel West calls the "tragi-comic" nature of your existence.

Forge forward with courage, with liberality of heart, and a little bit of *shtoch*–as the Ashkenazis might say–as you make your way through these pages. May the vibe continue shifting. May the discourse go meta (minus the Zuck). And may postmodernity continue cracking into a million little specs of diamond dust.

The Bronx is Gratuitous: Emilia Tanu

Tenderness.

Is the world truly devoid of tenderness?

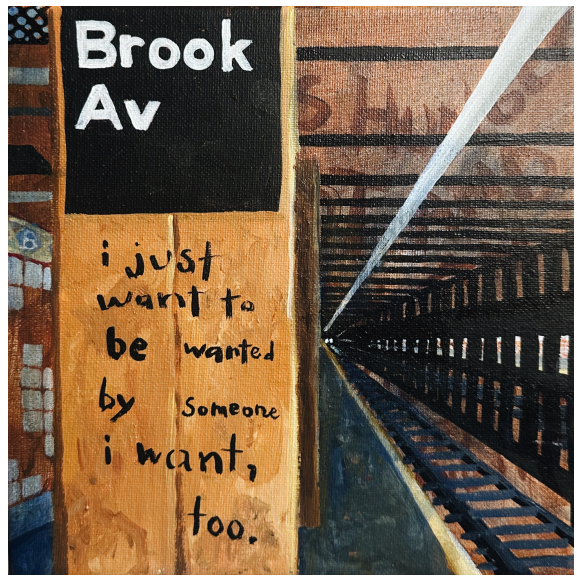
My little family of four(ish, depending on how you want to count Bernard of Clairvaux, our celibate monk cat) had lived in the South Bronx neighborhood of Mott Haven for two years. We moved there to be closer to my work in urban education. In addition, we have a community of like-minded friends in the area and were able to find an affordable childcare option for our toddler and infant.

Like most young families in New York City, we have moved roughly every 1-2 years due to the circumstances of various jobs, finances (rising rents, the pandemic, the changing economy), and my husband's medical training. Each time we've moved, Christ's gratuitous love has shone through the tenderness of strangers whom you have no choice but to s-q-u-e-e-z-e by–physically and socially–through the hallways of a an overpriced walkup or a narrow, dirty sidewalk.

Surprise must be one of God's favorite ways to crack postmodernity. His power to soften the human heart, to render it unassuming and defenseless, is sheer proof of his divinity. And if there are defenses…if one insists on holding onto the illusion of her own self-sufficiency, the increasingly untenable socio-economic reality of living in a city like New York forcefully shatters it all. Deeply aware of my own contingency, I find myself begging to be surprised by grace…for a divine encounter in a sprawling metropolis–where it can take a regular commute of 30 minutes to an hour to see a dear friend in-person.

I was surprised by the gratuity of God's tenderness through the encounters with neighbors I don't actually know, by neighborhoods in which I was a mere honored guest…the Invisible made almost too visible.

In my newlywed apartment, somewhere on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, my husband and I had a neighbor named Cathy, whom we would run into at daily Mass on occasion. An older single woman with a massive white dog, we would occasionally make small talk, until one day she shared her phone number. She would send poorly written texts to us about local retreats and events at the parish, disregarding any social discomforts of the age gap between us and dive into small talk about controversial topics like vaxxing.



In my first baby apartment, somewhere in Alphabet City, our elderly, single, female, neighbor named Alex lived in one of the few rent-controlled apartments in the building. A lifelong member of the community garden across the street who, assailed by multiple health problems that left her frequently homebound, would slip the registration form of the community garden under our door as well as flyers about local neighborhood events. And when Ellie was born, she gave her a custom mosaic "E," made up of various pink stones. Her two front doors had funky, earthy decals, and we could hear her lively conversations with guests in Spanish through our walls.

Mott Haven is where we had lived the longest so far. Upon our first of many daily commutes to daycare, the grocery store, church, work, or visiting friends, pushing Ellie in a stroller, many persons on the street would give their blessings to Ellie. At our local subway stop, we had many people (sometimes they are not the most sane or sober) help carry our stroller up the stairs. Pam, who lived on the third floor of the building next door, would look out her window and yell out to say hi to Ellie scootering around on the street below. Loud compliments, unsolicited advice (admonishments) about the fact that we didn't put a hat on her, "she's going to get sick," "watch your step on the sidewalk," "you dropped this stuffed animal!"

"Hi baby!"
"¡Que linda!"

Mercedes, our other next door neighbor, asked us if we wanted to buy her house as she hopes to move to Florida for retirement. Jay, our landlord, who frequently wears Christian graphic t-shirts a la 2000s Hillsong allowed us to be flexible with extending our lease on a day-to-day basis while we planned for our next move.

Soft Union

Our back porch neighbor, Danny, whose windows looked into ours, invited us to a community fair celebrating Taino (people indigenous to Caribbean islands like Puerto Rico) culture in the garden on our corner, which he runs. The garden's members frequently partied into the summer nights on the sidewalk while our next door neighbors from Barbados and the DR played their competing sounds of reggae and bachata.

"If she ever wants to come in here we need to put her in a mosquito net!"
"Come in and I'll share some eggs from the chicken coop!"
"Hey are you all coming to the party this weekend? We'll be on the other side of the garden."

In our neighborhood, there was no lack of desire to live. It was infused with a fierce presence of sounds, smells, and fashions. They found ways to resist the despair of the "daily grind," simply by their vibrant personalities and being unapologetically themselves.

The flowers, banners that ripple, candles shining through the night at the Shrine to Our Lady of Guadelupe across the precinct. A health code violation BBQ, erected on the sidewalk, on the first day it hit above 60 degrees. Gushing water from fire hydrants and speakers in the trunks from SUVs. Unsolicited small talk from the devout Muslim man who runs the bodega across the street about how Viagra isn't going to improve a relationship because it does not improve the emotional connection between two people.

We recognized that we were guests in Mott Haven–and it was an honor to be welcomed here with gratuitous love. Gratuitous love has looked like Ellie getting a free lollipop every time we went to the little Mexican grocery store. Gratuitous love looks like getting hand-me-down toddler Tims, an Adidas tracksuit set, toddler Uggs, and Marvel superhero Jibbitz for tiny Crocs from Ellie's daycare teacher Miss Nicole.

A list that is almost endless, it is the gratuity of unconditional, sometimes unable-to-be-reciprocated love that can only heal the suffering of loneliness.

As my family moves on to the next step, to another neighborhood to be closer to my husband's work, I will keep my eyes open for the gratuity of people's humanity which resembles a spark of the divine. Lest I forget…I'll fall back on my heart, whose caverns of loneliness and neediness will beg to be surprised once more.

Emilia is a wife and mother of 2 who lives and works in New York City. Her work includes the formation of Catholic educators who serve in under-resourced communities. Emilia's personal charism involves being way too excited about the vocation of the laity in today's cities.
@etchornay10

WISE
WISE
BBQ
ORIGINAL
Lay's
Lay's
WISE
WISE

Dinner with friends:

Tuesday night, Brian dined at one of the city's most decadent eateries with some recently celebrated writers and artists. Normally, he didn't spend so lavishly on food (the vitello tonnato was $45), but he was in a celebratory mood. Earlier that day, he'd met with a real estate tycoon's lawyer to negotiate the final terms of a contract to construct a megawatt of solar energy across twenty rooftops in the Bronx. Just three months before, Brian's company had moved out of a garage in Williamsburg. Since then, he'd signed over ten million dollars' worth of deals.

While Brian was dressed in clothes he'd bought at Nordstrom Rack, his companions epitomized metropolitan cool. They were so stylish, in fact, he couldn't help thinking they looked like actual money—millions of dollars of actual money, he thought.

They were no doubt erudite, as well. From everything Brian could tell, they had all attended one of the many prestigious liberal arts colleges he'd never known existed until he moved to New York City from Albuquerque. They chatted about society's problems with fluency and ease. At the bottom of everything, they agreed, as they drank their wine and devoured oysters, capitalism was always the dirty culprit. Someone insisted that "the money" be redistributed. It was a simple matter of "justice," they said.

A handsome young woman—the great granddaughter of a Greek shipping magnate, now at Columbia's MFA program writing poetry about the struggles of the working class—began to chastise Brian and his company for buying Chinese modules to use in their projects. When she knocked over a bottle of wine as she reached to refill her glass, the others threw back their heads and laughed.

The check arrived, and Brian placed his credit card on the table. He waited for his friends to put theirs out, too, but instead they checked their phones and fiddled with their belongings. It wasn't long before a painter with a neatly groomed mustache said, "Thanks so much for the treat, man. You really are the best." The painter then went on to invite everyone for a private tour of the gallery where his upcoming show was being held.

"I've made a series of blood paintings," he said.

A novelist asked whether the painter had used his own blood. Of course, not, the painter said—he had paid homeless people for theirs. A fashion photographer clapped his hands and told the painter what a wonderful opportunity the painter had given the homeless people to contribute to the making of great art.

Brian thought the moment perfect to announce that his company was part of a workforce training program that provided jobs installing solar panels to newly released convicts.

"You don't think that's a bit exploitative?" the painter said.
"We teach them valuable skills," Brian said. "Not to mention the jobs pay really well."
"Lugging solar panels around a hot roof all day," the poet said, "isn't the sort of skill I'd like to learn."

"I mean, it sort of verges on dehumanizing," the fashion photographer said.

The dinner tab was nearly seven hundred dollars. Brian excused himself to use the restroom. By the time he returned, his friends were calling to him from the door, saying their Ubers had arrived. They were all headed to the painter's gallery.

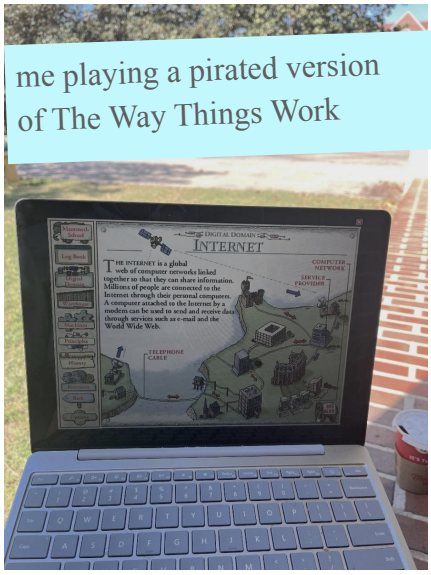
Matthew is the author of the novels Pure Cosmos Club, The Absolved, *and* High in the Streets. *He is also a primary member of the recording project Bang Bang Jet Away. IG @matthew_p_binder/Twitter @mbinder711*

Matthew Binder

The Way Things Work: Juan Manuel Martínez

Those of us who grew up being amazed by the interactive features offered by *Encarta 95*—the multimedia immersive experience with its thorough descriptions of topics that ranged from wild animals to geography, and music—but especially by the interactive game "*The Way Things Work*" which allowed you to operate and see the inner-workings of a variety of machines with an extinct mammoth as its main character—can easily go back to that period in our lives and view it as the starting point of our dual existence that has alternated between the screen and the physical world.

There we learned to click, to drag and drop, to scroll, and copy and paste, all while closing, minimizing, and maximizing windows…how to access that awe-inspiring, almost esoteric ethos of the world wide web that announced itself with the screeching noise produced by our dial-up modems—an excruciating but nostalgic sound more gently known as the "handshake" that today takes place silently out of our range of perception.

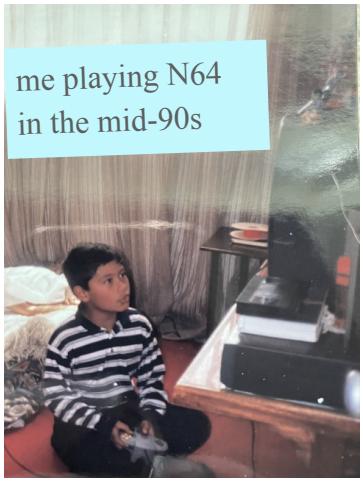


me playing a pirated version of The Way Things Work

We would spend hours in front of our family PC, legs dangling from our chairs while scrolling, clicking, watching videos, and listening to audio clips as we scrutinized each tab, image, game, and feature built into our software. But we knew there was a limit; we knew we would ultimately watch all the *Encarta* videos, read all its content, and click on all the levers and pulleys hidden in *The Way Things Work* as we alphabetically exhausted all there was to learn about the different machines and tools and the familiar sounds they made. These days also involved afternoon games at the park, hide and seek, or even playing soccer with a plastic bottle for lack of a real soccer ball during our lunch break at school. Little did we know how much these online interactions would come to take over the entirety of our days…and minds.

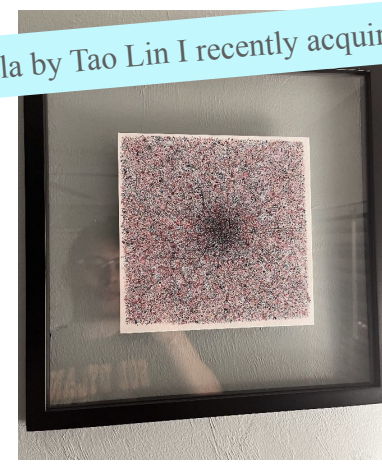
Jean Baudrillard remarked that "the great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation." Here we stand alongside the interactive virtual experience of an internet that has outgrown itself. Anyone who lived through the 80s, 90s, and aughts can remember that our relationship with technology and the web as a whole was a more organic and physical one. There were even the Phreaks, or the likes of Joybubble, a blind cult figure with perfect pitch who was able to whistle his way through international calls by emulating the tone dialing sounds that phones used to make, a sort of vocal human "handshake" over our phone lines. I would go online to search for walkthroughs to beat my N64 games, and sometimes I would search for Dragon Ball images to set as my default wallpaper—this being the greatest feat I ever accomplished during my first attempts to use the internet in the mid-90s. Back then, we experienced the collective and referential act of having watched the anime show in sync with millions of others: same time and same channel on national TV—a synchronous experience of shared culture now made extinct by the advent of streaming platforms.

It never occurred to me that a couple of years later, right after the 9/11 attacks, at the verge of neoliberal expansion and globalization—when I moved from Colombia to the US—I would end up talking to strangers with predetermined conversation icebreakers on LatinChat.com: (Colombiano, 13, Iowa / hometown, age, and place of residence). My first approach to English was non-verbal, as it involved meeting strangers in a chatroom rather than having to go through the dread of face-


me playing N64
in the mid-90s

to-face conversations, being that I was too shy to utter words in such a phonetically intimidating language as English seemed back then—and perhaps still is. Reading cyberpunk novels like *Snow Crash* and paranormal stories—typical of the enticing conspiracy theory aesthetics that permeate US culture and live on in films, radio, podcasts, and even the songs of Lana del Rey (just listen to *Chemtrails Over The Country Club*)—were another source of direct contact with the English language that did not necessitate actual speaking, and that got my mind off of having to interact with strangers. It was then that I, like many others, ended up caught in the excess of information.

Baudrillard highlights the surplus of information through its semblance to capital: "[information] is collapsing, and for this very reason: because where we think that information produces meaning, the opposite occurs. [It] devours its own content. It devours communication and the social." Anyone reading this text knows that this sort of informational autophagia is what propels us to write, to post, and comment, and that the only way through information overexposure is via synthesis, as this what we strive to accomplish. Some do it by memeing, shitposting, peddling conspiracy theories, or joining online tribes that overload the system with tweets, images, and posts that infuriate and drive away the experts, technocrats, and the college professors of the online world who have come to believe in its authenticity. The content that ends up being shared is ultimately so overtly esoteric and online-coded that it reminds us no one really knows what is going on, to the point of making the lack of referentials appear self-evident to the eye of the beholder; thus, laying bare the dents left by the implosion of information open for any lurker to gaze at.

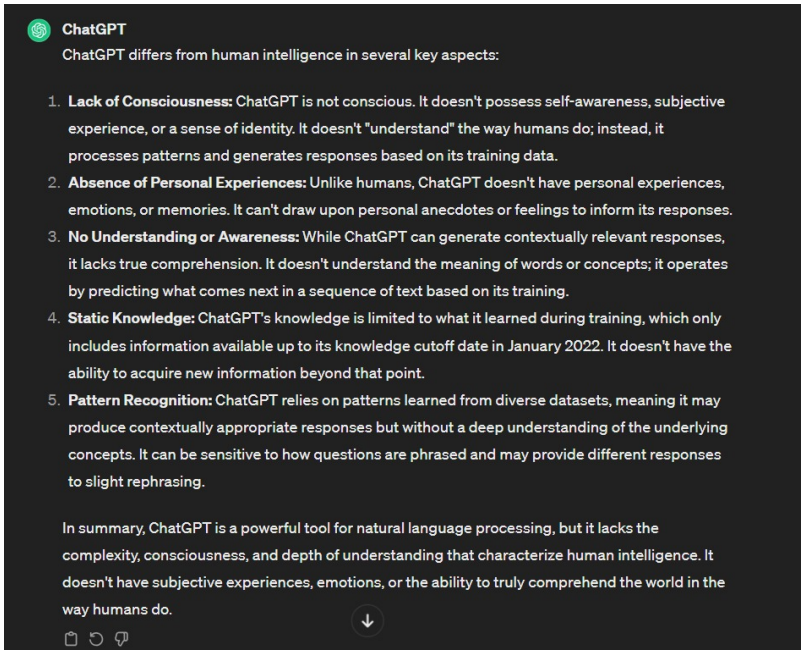

The *Autism* Mandala by Tao Lin I recently acquired.

There comes a time when you must realize that all the theorizing in the world cannot encompass the magnitude of a life on the web. Academic papers and whole books can be written about the influence of technology and our dual existence in and out of the screen and its digital media, but nothing compares to a sober rendering of our actual day-to-day interactions with the web.

During his Adderall and Xanax phase, Tao Lin cunningly described an interaction of this sort through the music of Nirvana as follows: "Paul looked up from where he'd remained on his yoga mat—absently scrolling through bohemianism's Wikipedia page after clicking 'bohemian' on Kurt Cobain's page, which he'd looked at, while rereading emails from his mother, to see if he died at 26 or 27." This is a glimpse into the sequence of information loops we get sucked into every time we lurk online, a clear picture of the whole array of feelings, interactions, and thoughts bombarding a single snippet of existence on the internet—reminding us that we're all on the verge of an information short circuit induced by excess feedback from the digital interface of our devices overlapping with the physical and tangible world. This overlapping of referentials is perhaps what Tao Lin strives to depict in his *Autism* Mandala I recently acquired:

After recently having attended an academic conference, it came to my attention that quantum sciences and the occult are still in vogue. It made me think of Slavoj Žižek's (with his own contradictions) words on the obscurantism of science, especially as it pertains to anything under the quantum label. As he explains "Much more worrying than the 'excesses' of Cultural Studies are the New Age obscurantist appropriations of today's 'hard' sciences which, in order to legitimize their position, invoke the authority of science itself." This is precisely what seems to be taking place at all levels of academia and the tech industry.

Take for instance so-called artificial intelligence. If we were to leave the actual task of understanding what's going on in our immediate reality to experts and technocrats-turned-gurus, they would have us believe that we are in the presence of a grander consciousness, a cybernetic deity or cyber-Cthulhu when interacting with ChatGPT. This esoteric view of computers can easily be rebuffed by simply realizing that —as Jaron Lanier proclaimed in the *New Yorker*— (reminiscent of Buddhist parlance) "There is no AI,"; and, thus, "mythologizing the technology only makes it more likely that we'll fail to operate it well." Our lack of strong referentials will have us jumping from one fad to another, even if it involves attributing mutual intelligence to a solipsistic conversation with the bot.


ChatGPT
ChatGPT differs from human intelligence in several key aspects:
1. Lack of Consciousness: ChatGPT is not conscious. It doesn't possess self-awareness, subjective experience, or a sense of identity. It doesn't "understand" the way humans do; instead, it processes patterns and generates responses based on its training data.
2. Absence of Personal Experiences: Unlike humans, ChatGPT doesn't have personal experiences, emotions, or memories. It can't draw upon personal anecdotes or feelings to inform its responses.
3. No Understanding or Awareness: While ChatGPT can generate contextually relevant responses, it lacks true comprehension. It doesn't understand the meaning of words or concepts; it operates by predicting what comes next in a sequence of text based on its training.
4. Static Knowledge: ChatGPT's knowledge is limited to what it learned during training, which only includes information available up to its knowledge cutoff date in January 2022. It doesn't have the ability to acquire new information beyond that point.
5. Pattern Recognition: ChatGPT relies on patterns learned from diverse datasets, meaning it may produce contextually appropriate responses but without a deep understanding of the underlying concepts. It can be sensitive to how questions are phrased and may provide different responses to slight rephrasing.
In summary, ChatGPT is a powerful tool for natural language processing, but it lacks the complexity, consciousness, and depth of understanding that characterize human intelligence. It doesn't have subjective experiences, emotions, or the ability to truly comprehend the world in the way humans do.

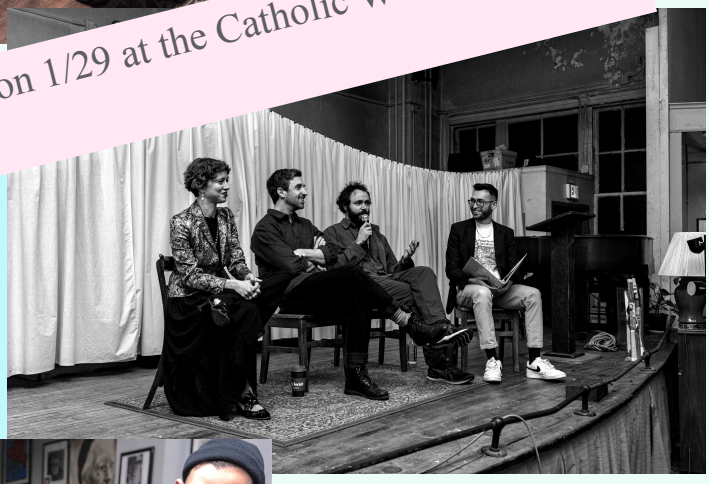
In fact, the other day I had a heart-to-heart with ChatGPT. It didn't take long for it to state the obvious, that AI "is a powerful tool for natural language processing, but it lacks the complexity, consciousness, and depth of understanding that characterize human intelligence," and, likewise, "It doesn't have subjective experiences, emotions, or the ability to truly comprehend the world in the way humans do".

Nevertheless, as the likes of Camille Paglia have pointed out, as a response to our lack of religious piety, the need for a grand narrative can only be accomplished by art. In her words, "politics cannot fill the gap. Society, with which Marxism is obsessed, is only a fragment of the totality of life [and] those who invest all of their spiritual energies in politics will reap the whirlwind." Certainly, no one really knows what the hell is going on, and leaving such a grand task to AI, politicians, experts, tech bros, or even scientists—the same ones who went insanely authoritarian during covid—is not the way out. As a subscriber "to what Jung calls synchronicity," in her *Sexual Personae*, Paglia points out that "rationalists have their place, but their limited assumptions and methods must be kept out of the arts. Interpretation of poem, dream, or person requires intuition and divination, not science." The same goes, I would argue, for the interpretation of the online experience, its social dynamics, and aesthetics in our fragmented and atomized society.

So here I sit, trying to type this piece within the uprootedness of my linguistic capabilities, perhaps lulled by the excess of information, citing too much as in any novel by Vila-Matas, and perhaps doubting too much like—Vila-Matas himself. "Dudaba mucho, eso está claro," he explains and goes on to say that "I suffered by doubting so much, and I could have saved myself the disquieting feeling and doubted no matter what, without making a big deal out of it. I was simply neglecting that doubting was to write" (translation my own). Those feeble minds that cannot fathom writing, who cannot think outside the confines of some canonical school of thought wouldn't stand a single day inside my head, much less a whole season on Earth. So, for today, let me doubt freely, let me revel in doubt as I type these words and try to figure out *the way things work*.

Juan is a Spanish Ph.D. candidate at the University of Florida where he also teaches Spanish. Aside from that, he works as an adjunct at a community college, and he is an online English instructor at Universidad Javeriana in Colombia. Yes, he's into teaching and he has to make ends meet, but he has published short stories and articles in Latin American literary magazines and plans to continue his writing path in English. @jmarti117

scenes from “Holy Lit!” on 1/29 at the Catholic Worker Maryhouse in NYC



featuring Tara Isabella Burton, Jordan Castro, and Matthew Binder

My Gentrified Cookie: Stephen G. Adubato

I woke up with a gnawing sense of guilt. That, and a ghastly headache. For weeks, I had been reading Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* to try to induce myself to sleep deeply enough to have convoluted Freudian dreams…like the one where he dreamt of the M2F who peed on a fence while an old lady attempted to hand him her business card (no cap bro look it up it's in there frfr). Alas, my insomnia persisted. Yesterday, I sauntered down to the nearest Duane Reade to pick up some Unisom.

I know what you're thinking. "You heartless prick! Who do you think you are, patronizing a chain store owned by a megacorporation?!"

Mea culpa…what can I say? I was too cheap and lazy to walk another four blocks down to the family-owned pharmacy. But in my defense, at least I bought the generic brand. The one whose packaging looks just like the leading one, but not enough so that it infringes copyright laws…you know, the one that says "compare to UNISOM brand sleeping pills."

And like an old divorcee who is determined to catch the attention of her younger, pretty-boy neighbor, my insomnia persisted. Rather than immerse itself in a Freudian dreamscape, my psyche was plagued with pangs of guilt for having supported yet another sinister corp that further fuels our nefarious neoliberal regime. My headache was my divine punishment, I gathered, as I skulked off back to Duane Reade to buy some ibuprofen (yes the brand name one…the generic one was never powerful enough to kill off my guilt-induced headaches).

Once I downed my daily cup of loose leaf Earl Grey tea and blasted an additive-free, non-BigTobacco-brand ciggie, I made my way into the bathroom and peered into the mirror with hesitation. My hair was giving lazy-ass-millennial-layabout-with-an-email-job-who-is-far-from-reaching-his-full-potential-but-has-a-valid-excuse-but-does-not-want-to-have-to-explain-himself-to-you-rn. In simpler terms, my hair was a mess. Surely, I could walk into one of the numerous barbershops in the neighborhood. Support local. Bloom where I'm planted. But the harsh truth was that the Moroccan barbers, who seemed to have a monopoly on the neighborhood's barbershops, never cut hair with artist-like precision and passion as did my Dominican barber in the Heights. (There was one Dominican barbershop in the neighborhood, but they never really tried very hard since the locals' standards were so low).

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SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: CIGARETTE SMOKE CONTAINS CARBON MONOXIDE.

Going to see Yovanis in the Heights was always an experience, to say the least. As soon as I step off the 1 train, I am greeted with the voice of fruit vendors marketing their goods to passersby, the alluring aroma of mangu wafting out a restaurant's kitchen window and waitresses asking "q quieres mi amol," and men–clearly not realizing what century we were in–cat-calling the females who crossed their path (some of whom they did it to just for the hell of it, as these lasses were—quite frankly—mid af). Upon walking into the shop, I'm greeted in the entrance by a set of free weights, a bowl of condoms, a Bible opened to Leviticus propped up on a stand, and the sounds of either classic merengue or a fiery Pentecostal preacher blasting out of the speakers. Yovanis would periodically take breaks from

working laboriously on my fade to engage in theological debates with a enigmatic lady dressed in a white gown and turban whose mission was to preach the good news to the heathens, or alternatively to dance with the lady whose job it was to sweep up the hair scraps strewn around the floor.

I prolonged having to make a decision about taking the hour-and-a-half-long ride up to the Heights (further evading my "work" for the day) by scrolling through reels on my suggested page: a video of a devout Muslim cat named Sister Minnie preparing to make salat in her new, "very halal" Ferragamo hijab; an ad for a new hipster coffee shop down the block featuring their fair trade strawberry matcha cold brew with raw macadamia milk and a vegan organic dark chocolate chip cookie ("Fire, fire, gentrifier!" I shouted aloud, trying to convince myself that I wasn't actually aroused by such a crude display of food porn); yet another ad, featuring a moderately famous microinfluencer after having gotten a haircut at the barbershop two blocks away, proclaiming, "my boy got me rightttttt."

A sign, I figured, that God was tired of my lackadaisical commitment to being on the right side of history. It was time for me to abandon my convenience, my vanity and sense of self-importance.

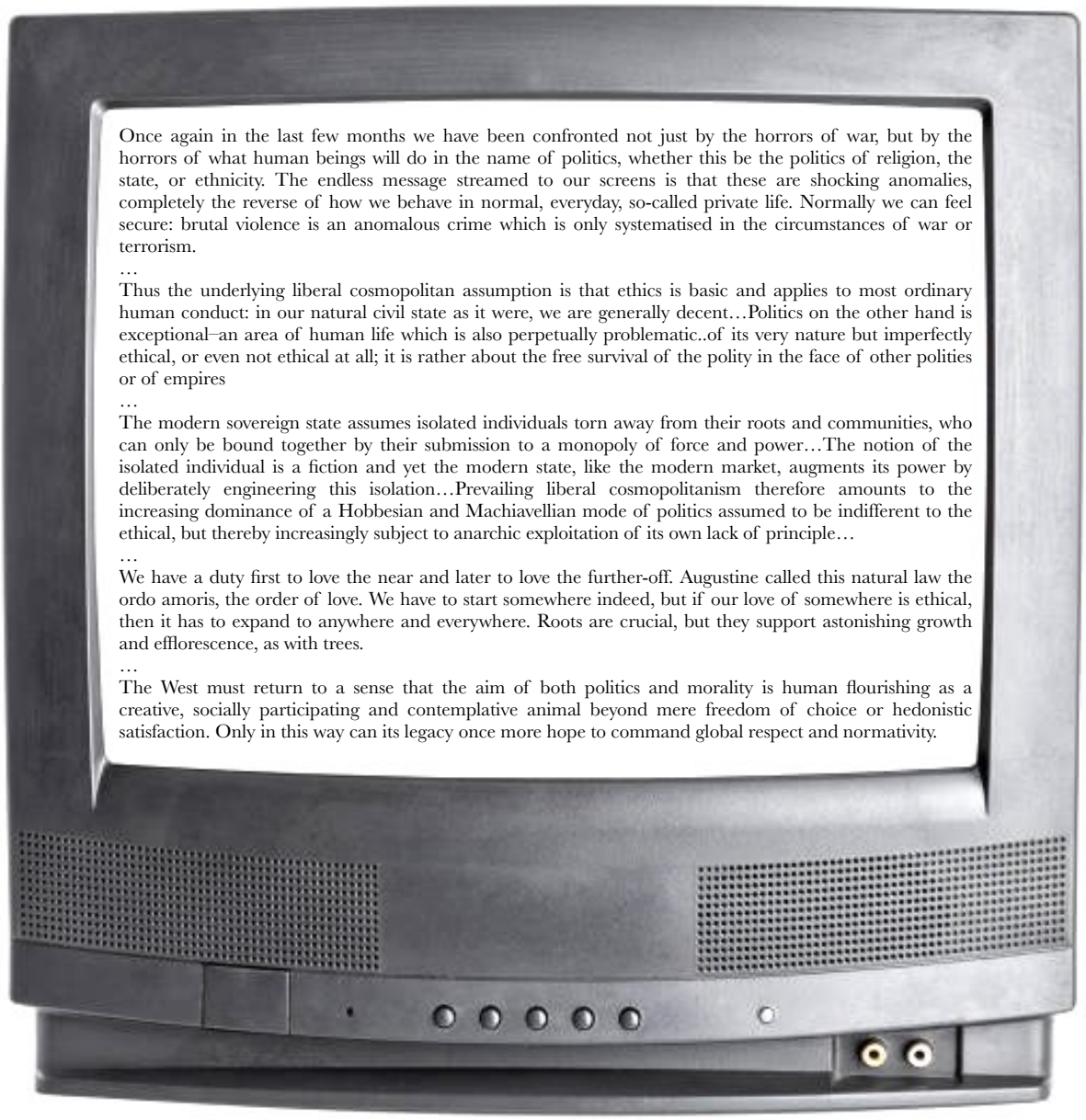
"Habibi! What can I do for you today?" I knew from his greeting that the barber was being overly friendly to compensate for his lack of skills. A half hour later, I walked out in misery, avoiding catching a glimpse of my decidedly unfresh cut in the window of the store next to the barbershop.

I continued dragging myself down the block until I happened upon the gentrified coffee shop. "Oh look, another sign," I mumbled to myself aloud (much to the disturbance of the stroller-pushing-mom walking past me). Abandoning my morals to the wayside, I dished out an amount of money I'm too ashamed to specify for the cold brew latte and cookie. Surely, my horrifying haircut burned me enough calories in purgatory to make up for the punishment I earned for indulging my weakness for sweet, delectable, perfect-combination-of-chewy-and-crunchy, gentrified cookies. Yet the guilt, as well as my headache, creeped up on me yet again. I sneered at the girl wearing a nose ring and those cheap Amazon over-ear headphones who was typing away on her laptop. So much for "local community."

To distract myself from my misery, I pulled up the barber's Google Reviews and left a nasty 2-star review under my anon account, citing that his good customer service was a facade for his lack of skill as a barber, and suggesting he either learn how to cut hair right or just be rude to his customers for transparency's sake. I then searched for the microinfluencer's page and left a comment on the reel of him leaving the barbershop: "you got me tight af rn with this false-ass advertising my guy. Hella misleading."

I went back to my suggested page and started doomscrolling til I found another Sister Minnie video. I decided to binge-watch until I learned a thing or two from her about submitting to the Almighty's will. *Astaghfirullah*.

Stephen is the curator of the zine. He also writes as a freelancer and teaches philosophy.


Once again in the last few months we have been confronted not just by the horrors of war, but by the horrors of what human beings will do in the name of politics, whether this be the politics of religion, the state, or ethnicity. The endless message streamed to our screens is that these are shocking anomalies, completely the reverse of how we behave in normal, everyday, so-called private life. Normally we can feel secure: brutal violence is an anomalous crime which is only systematised in the circumstances of war or terrorism.
…
Thus the underlying liberal cosmopolitan assumption is that ethics is basic and applies to most ordinary human conduct: in our natural civil state as it were, we are generally decent…Politics on the other hand is exceptional–an area of human life which is also perpetually problematic..of its very nature but imperfectly ethical, or even not ethical at all; it is rather about the free survival of the polity in the face of other polities or of empires
…
The modern sovereign state assumes isolated individuals torn away from their roots and communities, who can only be bound together by their submission to a monopoly of force and power…The notion of the isolated individual is a fiction and yet the modern state, like the modern market, augments its power by deliberately engineering this isolation…Prevailing liberal cosmopolitanism therefore amounts to the increasing dominance of a Hobbesian and Machiavellian mode of politics assumed to be indifferent to the ethical, but thereby increasingly subject to anarchic exploitation of its own lack of principle…
…
We have a duty first to love the near and later to love the further-off. Augustine called this natural law the ordo amoris, the order of love. We have to start somewhere indeed, but if our love of somewhere is ethical, then it has to expand to anywhere and everywhere. Roots are crucial, but they support astonishing growth and efflorescence, as with trees.
…
The West must return to a sense that the aim of both politics and morality is human flourishing as a creative, socially participating and contemplative animal beyond mere freedom of choice or hedonistic satisfaction. Only in this way can its legacy once more hope to command global respect and normativity.

-John Milbank, excerpts from his essay "The real wars behind the culture wars: transcending liberal/fascist framings of global crises," Cracks in Postmodernity Substack, 3/18/24

My Favorite Third Place

"The phrase 'third places' derives from considering our homes to be the 'first' places in our lives, and our workplaces the 'second'… The character of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people's more serious involvement in other spheres…They are the heart of a community's social vitality, the grassroots of democracy, but sadly, they constitute a diminishing aspect of the American social landscape. Life without community has produced, for many, a lifestyle consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back again shuttle. Social well-being and psychological health depend upon community."
-Ray Oldenburg

The bathroom at Cookies on Myrtle Ave. This is where I've conversed with God, learned my friend's sexuality, kissed ketamine, bonded with a friend group, made out with a girl and a boy, hid from the crowd, and even used the bathroom.
-Brennan, Brooklyn

YMCA of Wareham, MA. In particular the men's sauna. Thanks to the charitable legacy of a local wealthy family, the facilities are top-tier and well-maintained, while membership remains affordable. Clientele spans across all socioeconomic strata. The men's sauna might contain any combination of retired cop, real estate developer, professional MMA fighter, and guy wearing an ankle bracelet.
- Jacob, Maine

This is in part aspirational, but I'd like churches to be third places for young people the way they are for retired boomers. Like, what are you up to on a Tuesday? "Just helping out at the church." Are you an underemployed millennial or a zoomer who didn't finish college? You should help out on a Tuesday. You should come have an instant coffee and shoot the shit with Ramón the Sexton and iron linens and pray the noon office and run something to the post office and help an old lady get to the curb for car service and help make community dinner in the undercroft kitchen. It might contribute to your holiness but it'd also probably just help with your depression.
-Rev. Spencer, Queens

There's this family restaurant in Gainesville called The Clock. A very old guy with a walking stick greets you at the door and takes you to one of the empty-booths. The coffee doesn't take more than a couple of minutes to arrive, and the blonde, middle aged waitress with a raspy voice quickly places it on the paper placemat that has a colorful image of the Florida Peninsula on it. Unlike those hipster coffee shops, you can drink the coffee there for hours on end and never get that uneasy, jittery feeling that comes from excess caffeine, but it does make you pee a lot. Everyone seems to be doing their thing. The eldest and loneliest people sit and eat in the bar stools and look so serene and Zen-like, unaware of their sciatica, usually reading a newspaper they get from who-knows-where. Smoking is not permitted, though.-
-Juan, Florida

Boston Common Garden. Love walking around day and night. Day for its natural spring beauty, and night for its still and romantic vibe as the gas light lamps light up the remaining lovers sitting on benches embracing each other.
-Davis, Boston

Hot (or Not) : Summer '24

HOT: Book reviewing in general. Nobody reads books but everyone's reading reviews…Also books as raw material for discourse. -Matthew Gasda

HOT: Baseball. A sport that is unapologetically boring and inaccessible, with 100 years of unwritten rules and esoteric traditions to keep normies out. -Joe Enabnit

HOT: Artists taking responsibility for creating their own Apollonian tragedies. -Kat Chamberlin

HOT: Frederic Malle. Famous for their masterpiece Portrait of a Lady, my signature scent for the cooler months has been Rose et Cuir, a smoky concoction of roses, cedar, and leather. Moving into spring, I'd recommend Rose Tonnerre, a magnificent cool rose soliflore (can you tell I adore rose perfumes?). Ask for Roberto in the Madison Ave. boutique, mention Martyr sent you, and you will be treated to Roberto's impressive knowledge of olfactory delights. It IS terribly expensive, but you get what you pay for. And for those of us in our broke era, be sure to take advantage of their free samples. Afterwards, head over to the Conservatory Lake in Central Park at 72nd street, order an overpriced confection at Le Pain Quotidien, and admire the view. Take some time to stop and smell the roses. -Martyr

Hot: Numbing out over a hobby like paint-by-numbers, puzzles, or knitting. Sometimes your brain needs a break. -Bridget Ruffing

NOT: Leslie Jamison. Jamison has always seemed a little bit not-self-aware for a memoirist. Her latest, *Splinters*, about her divorce, is pure self-justification. -Valerie Stivers

NOT: Docuseries. There were already too many movie-length celebrity and true crime documentaries out there in the 1990s-2000s cable era that engaged in nostalgia-bait and/or violence-porn to waste hours of their viewers' lives. Now with streaming, this Lays-potato chip-esque form of entertainment is stretched out over the course of numerous episodes to "teach" people things…except no one really learns anything or even enjoys it. -AJ Fezza

NOT: "Internet writing" that throws a tantrum upon drafting, offering sentences that appear to have been produced by a random number generator. If our human editors are impotent and distracted with culture and clout signaling, we need to ask what our superintelligent mommies want from us while editing. -Ruby Sutton

NOT: Numbing out over a 2-hour TikTok binge session. It's confusing and tiring to procrastinate your real-life feelings and work by consuming someone else's feelings and work, filtered and highlighted to optimize engagement. -Bridget Ruffing

NOT: Pictures made by ambulance chasers capitalizing on others' poor fortunes. -Kat Chamberlin

Katherine Dee
@cracksinpomo

Nothing will make you take arguing about current events on the Internet less seriously–should you be one of those people in the unfortunate situation of having ever taken it seriously–than watching a few cycles of "The Discourse." Eventually, you reach a point, even as a lurker, even as a non-participant, where you ask yourself, "Aren't these people exhausted?"

12:00 PM · Jun 1, 2024

6 Retweets **6** Quote Tweets **6** Likes

Katherine Dee
@cracksinpomo

When you share a take, even when you're doing it in good faith, chances that you've educated yourself on whatever is happening are slim. You're showing that you're on the right side of history; you're a good person. It is not a thoughtful exercise; it is not about people who "care" about these things in the sense that we typically use the word "care."

1:05 AM · Dec 21, 2012

13 Retweets **-15** Quote Tweets **<14** Likes

Katherine Dee
@cracksinpomo

And so, you're left with what's happening, as filtered and distorted as it often is. It's one of the last remaining ways to define oneself. ...Who are you? We'll find out when we check your timeline.

1:00 PM · Nov 22, 1963

IT WAS Retweets **AN INSIDE** Quote Tweets **JOB** Likes

Katherine Dee
@cracksinpomo

As each hot topic comes into view, they start saying the correct thing—an ever more correct thing. If they're frequent posters, like, say, if they spend a lot of time on X talking about politics and current events, they might slip up sometimes before they get a sense of what their side has workshopped. The take is workshopped, the thought leader of their side announces their position: the script is updated. And then it's off to the races to shame people who are either off script completely—a take that's neither intelligible as left, right, or the mysterious third camp of "above it all"—or unambiguously batting for the other side.

1:05 AM · Feb 30, 2024

100 Retweets **100** Quote Tweets **001** Like

Katherine Dee
@cracksinpomo

But again, this isn't about thoughtful discussion or even aggressive debate—it's not even about what you really believe. Who knows what you believe anymore? It's about what beliefs represent; not what they are.

7:11 PM · May 07, 2024

234 Retweets **567** Quote Tweets **890** Likes

-Katherine Dee, excerpts from her essay "#IStandWith[Insert tribal belonging here]: on the barrage of virtue signaling," Cracks in Postmodernity Substack, 10/23/23

I Don't Know Why I'm Telling You This: Liz Ayre

Polly and I used to get homeless people to buy us packs of cigarettes when we were fifteen, oftentimes in our school uniforms, kilts with knee socks and blue blazers. We liked to take a bus to a coffee shop afterwards where people in their twenties hung out and smoke a whole pack of Canadian cigarettes between the two of us, which we could easily do because we didn't know how to inhale them. Waiting for the bus back one time I told her that I thought we might be doing it wrong.

"Try taking some smoke into your mouth and then taking a sip of air afterwards so you inhale both of them," I said to her.

When she did it, she started coughing.

"Wait, that's what people are doing?" she said when she could breathe normally again.

"I think so," I said. "I'm not sure, but I'm pretty sure that's what smoking is."

After that we did it that way, and sometimes it made me throw up, but it also made me feel dizzy in a fun way, as though I was poisoning myself for a thrill.

When I was little I developed a horrible phobia that no one took seriously. I suppose it started when my third grade teacher gave us a speech about how there were poisonous red berries near the edge of the schoolyard, and that we shouldn't eat them because it would make us very sick and could even kill us. She said the birds could eat them because they ate around the center part, but that they could only do that because they had beaks. There was no way we could do that, so we shouldn't eat them or even go near them at all. After that I became fixated on them. We had a bush of the same red berries in our yard near the hammock and I'd see myself in my mind's eye walking over to the bush, eating them, and lying down in the hammock to die. I'd watch myself sleepwalk over to them as though watching a nightmare through a mirrored wall, and I was powerless to stop myself from eating them and dying. It was a long time before I figured out why I couldn't stop thinking about them. I used to fantasize, against my will, that they were appearing in my food. I remember my mother scolding me for picking apart a dinner roll. I had to tear everything up into little pieces so that I could see there weren't any berries hiding in it. Was my mother putting them in my food? No. They seemed to materialize out of thin air.

I had this boyfriend in highschool, Sean Delaney. An awful name, too many vowels. We met when we were seniors. I didn't really have any friends because I'd transferred sophomore year and never really fit in. I was sickly and jaded, focused on not eating and getting good grades so that I could move to New York City and start properly living, which

to me meant modeling and doing cocaine. He wore boat shoes and vineyard vines, but we had drugs in common. He put me through hell. I remember him jumping out of a half-moving car he was still driving slowly with me in the passenger seat, both of us crying, screaming about how he was going to kill himself if I broke up with him. He almost killed me, then and other times, but nobody seemed to notice. When I finally got free of him, I saw years later online that he'd covered his arms in bad tattoos that were all from album art by The Velvet Underground. They were my favorite band when we dated, and he always made fun of me for my taste in music. I remember he liked listening to Dave Matthews Band. The music made me sick like his vowel-heavy name. Last I heard he moved to Australia where he was managing a strip club.

My best friend in middle school, Claire Henson, went to Australia once with her family. They were always going on all sorts of trips. Her dad was an orthodontist. My mother was jealous of her mother because their house always looked like it came out of the Martha Stewart catalog. Her older sister used to sit in the family room with her thong showing out the top of her sweatpants. Later she became a doctor, but it turned out she had a bad eating disorder. When they got back from Australia, Claire had brought with her a huge lollipop the size of her head. I forget the brand but it had a big shiny pink wrapper she'd take off and put back on again. We used to lie in her bed and take turns licking it. You kind of had to suck on it like it was somebody's arm or something. I remember running my tongue back and forth along it quickly to try to get more flavor. Then at some point she'd tell me that was enough and put the wrapper back on and put it on her shelf. I don't think her mom knew we were eating it in Claire's bedroom whenever I came over to the house because she probably would have thought that was a gross thing to do and taken it away from us. I remember one time I used her sister's razor in the shower to shave my legs, and even though I was extra careful about not leaving any traces, she still knew and told Claire to tell me not to do it again.

That was all in British Columbia, where I grew up. The place that feels the most like home, though I've never been back since we left at the end of ninth grade for me. A friend visited and told me he couldn't get over the quality of the air there, all green and ocean. So full of oxygen and positive ions. I guess I remember that, I told him, though I'm not sure I do.

There were lots of little islands off the coast of Vancouver Island, where we lived. One time my parents sent me to a film camp there, on Saltspring Island, where we ran around with video cameras and made a movie about a girl getting run over by a car. I remember the counselor talking to us about gay marriage, which wasn't legal at the time.

"Do you think gay people should be able to get married?" She asked us, and all the kids said

"Yes."

I said no to be different, and when she asked me why I scrambled to come up with an idea.

"Because being gay is special," I said, "It's against the norm. Gay people should want to stay that way. Being able to get married would make their relationships less unique, less against the grain. They don't need to be incorporated. It's better that way."

I remember her frowning at me in a way that conveyed she thought I'd said something wrong. She didn't like me after that, and I wanted to clarify I wasn't hateful, I was just trying to say something special. For years I thought I'd made a mistake, but now, I think I was actually weirdly right and my stance was a sophisticated one for someone my age then, which was probably around thirteen.

I made out with a woman for the first time in a long while the other night. I met her on Tinder, and told her all sorts of things about my life. We'd matched before. She liked a photo I'd posted of my legs in the bath with a copy of Carl Jung's "Psychology and Alchemy" on my knees in water that was blue from this Kneipp bath oil my mother used to use when I was a child that smells like valerian and hops. It's one of those smells that takes me back in time to being small and old sense memories of feeling safe in water. "Jung in the tub," Ariel wrote to me at first and I ignored it, deleted the app. Then I saw her on there again, months later, during mercury retrograde, a time when things from the past return for reevaluation. A picture of her walking down the street smoking, another of her lying face down in the desert sand. The last one got me. I asked her for coffee, and we kept rescheduling, "because of mercury retrograde" we said. I finally met her at Cafe Reggio.

She was late, and I had nothing to do so I asked the waiter for a piece of paper. He handed me a blank ticket from a receipt book, and I started writing down visions for my future while I waited for her. It was raining outside. I was doing this "21 day vision quest challenge" with a few of my girlfriends. Everyday we wrote down things we envisioned

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for ourselves in the future in the categories of spirituality, material wealth, health, emotional wellbeing, and mental development. The point was to exercise our creative muscles, to let ourselves dream big. You couldn't repeat things each day, you had to keep reaching. I was on day five. I wrote things down on the Guest Check Ticket as though I were placing an order: "ridiculously hot boyfriend" "swamp house in Florida" "photoshoot with snake wranglers" "best selling novel" "vintage tile bathroom with a shell lamp" "old house with a sunroom" "trip to Croatia" "direct a movie about a death metal band in the 90s played by all female cast in drag" "a garden" "article in Vogue" "friends with June, Maggie, and Sebastian" "Doen dress" "red light electrolysis wand."

At one point a pretty girl who looked like pictures of Ariel walked in and smiled at me and then went into the bathroom.

"Maybe that's her?" I thought.

When she came out, I smiled at her again more directly and she stood and smiled back at me for a moment, and then she walked out the door. I laughed about the encounter and texted Ariel about it.

"lolololol my doppelganger entering to survey the scene before my arrival," she texted back. "Be there in ten just looking for parking."

When she walked up to the table I was surprised to see she didn't look like the other woman at all. She was larger and mousier, and for a moment it seemed like she could see me registering that on my face. She looked momentarily saddened by my perceived disappointment. I smiled and leaned towards her when she sat at the table to try to convey that I was happy she'd made it, that I was happy to meet her, and that I wanted to get to know her. She told me many things that could have been red flags over the course of the three hours we spent talking. She told me she'd spent covid between Sedona and New Mexico, that her best friend was a poet and a scorpio, like me, that she went to analysis four days a week in the morning as part of her training to become a psychoanalyst, that she took after her grandmother, who was a Holocaust survivor, that she'd been institutionalized for ten days after having a psychotic break brought on by taking too much acid a year and a half ago, that she was a heroin addict when she was nineteen, that she was back in Narcotics Anonymous now and loving it, that she felt burdened by her suffering but also valued it because she saw it as her pathway to God, that she was Jewish but loved Catholicism, that she'd also spent a large part of her life sleeping with men, but that her last love had been with a woman, a pisces, and that she'd never date a pisces again. I spelled out my trauma history too, surprised to feel like crying when I said certain things that I thought I was over, mainly because of the way she looked at me and made such empathetic noises and gestures when I told her about the parts that had hurt the most. We told each other lots of things. I could feel our wounds matching up already and how nice it would be to give in and fall into some codependent relationship over the course of a few weeks, and how I'd better not.

She was clutching her juul the whole time and vaping covertly. I asked her if I could hit it, and from then on she put it down in the center of the table and the two of us took turns vaping out of the eyesight of our waiter then placing the device back down between us.

When it was time to go because the restaurant was closing I asked if she was smoking cigarettes still, and she said she was on and off but she tried not to because she didn't like to smell like it.

"I'd have one with you though," she said and smiled at me.

I had some in my purse. It was raining outside so we stood beneath the stone awning of an apartment building. I wanted to sit but it was too wet.

"We can smoke in the car," she said, "We just have to roll the windows down."

"Of course!" I said, "I would have expected that, though if you hadn't rolled them down I suppose I would have gone along with that too even though I would have thought it was a bit odd. I'm always down for an adventure."

She put on Mazzy Star's "Fade Into You" in the car, and I knew she wanted me to kiss her but it was too on the nose. I pulled away from her slightly and started talking more to distract from the way she was looking at me. We were talking more about therapy.

"I wasn't going to say it earlier because I didn't want to go to deep on our first date, but we've covered pretty much everything, so I guess I will, but the reason I left AA and don't identify anymore as an alcoholic was because I figured out through analysis that my mother had always unconsciously really wanted me sick. Her dad was in AA and she grew up in the rooms, her whole life revolved around his alcoholism and dysfunction. I realized that I used to go home sick all the time as a kid because I knew on some level that my mom liked it and it made her happy, so that's when all the sickness started really. I thought I had to be that way for her to love me. But as I've talked about all of it over the course of the last several years, I realized I didn't need to be sick anymore and that I actually wasn't an alcoholic. I just thought my whole identity had to be based on being sick or else I was invisible or something, and that manifested in all sorts of psychosomatic stuff, but it's all pretty much gone now and I drink normally. As I talked about all of it the symptoms disappeared. I don't even like alcohol anymore. I mean, I guess I have a little trouble with smoking pot, but a manageable amount."

"That's amazing," she said.

She was driving her parents' car because hers got stolen on a TikTok challenge, she told me. She said that when the cops called her to tell her about it they started by asking her if she knew what TikTok was. I thought that was probably a bad sign of psychic health. It was never a good sign when someone's car got stolen. Her parents' car had heated seats. Rain got onto the car window sills while we smoked, and as soon as we were done, we rolled them up. She was playing indie rock from a premade spotify playlist that I saw her put on. I thought that was sort of sweet and endearing. She knew where I lived because I'd told her earlier and she steered the car in that direction. Her sister used to have an apartment the next avenue over, she told me. She knew the area well.

"That whole street's haunted," she said.

"Yeah, I was doing a session with my energy healer once and she asked me if I lived across the street from a graveyard. I told her she was close, it was an old hospital, the hospital that was the center of the AIDS epidemic decades ago. Now they've remodeled it and turned it into a luxury apartment building. My mother says Michael Kors lives there. I can't see why. It must be so haunted."

"I went in that building to use the bathroom once!" Ariel said.

"That's right across from where I live."

"I know," she said.

We idled in the car outside when we got there. It was still raining and it felt romantic. I undid my seatbelt and leaned towards Ariel to say goodbye and we started kissing.

In my writing class the other day we read a story where the final image was of children emptying a container of coins into a dryer and then running the machine. I kept thinking about it and wondering what that would sound like. Rain fell on the roof of the car.

Ariel's mouth tasted like cigarettes. It was gross, but not in a way that I minded. I was self-conscious about my own mouth tasting bad, which was funny because we were in the same boat.

My father bought the apartment that I live in in the 80s, before I was born. He used to work at the hospital across the street. He got a deal from the landlord because he'd been renting the place initially and only paid $35,000 to buy it.

I've been coming here since I was a kid. I remember looking up at the elevator buttons, and racing my brother to press the round, illuminating button for the 4th floor when we were children. I'd lived there on and off in college too. I remember losing my mind on no sleep and adderall trying to write a paper on Hegel in college for a class I later had to drop because I wasn't functioning well. I remember a dumpy historian I met in the library breaking up with me on the bed after we'd had sex by playing my "It Ain't Me Babe" by Bob Dylan. I took him seriously and cried and hugged him goodbye. Now I think I probably would have laughed in his face for doing something so heinous.

Around that same time I went to the movies at IFC alone. I can't remember what film it was that I went to see. I remember not being able to focus on it because a man who was also alone came in and sat next to me, and over the course of the whole film we inched closer to each other, until he put his hand on my leg and I leaned into his body and eventually kissed his neck. We watched the film after that but the whole thing was so clouded by the intoxicating rush of touching this stranger that it passed by my eyes in a wild blur as though I was sitting in a moving vehicle. I went home with him after that in a taxi, all the way to Brooklyn. We barely spoke and just touched each other in the car until we got to his place. I went to the bathroom and realized I was still bleeding. My period had seemed like it was over but apparently it wasn't. When I went back to his room and kissed him and told him I was on my period he seemed slightly disgusted, which I found unattractive. I never understood that in men. We slept together anyway. His bookshelves were lined with beautiful old paperbacks. I commented on it afterwards and he told me that his father had run a well known indie press that had shut down now and that these were all of his books. He'd died and left them to him. That was one of the only things I learned about him. I liked the detail, but it didn't matter. Things would have happened the same way without it.

That was my last year of college. I had tried starting in analysis then with a quiet French woman named Odile whose office was right down the street from where I lived, on the same block as Ariel's sister's apartment, I'd just learned that evening. I remember leaving her office one time when it was raining and sitting at a restaurant on the corner of 11th street under an awning and writing in my journal when a woman walked up to me and told me she had something she really needed to tell me. She was carrying a purple umbrella and had hypnotizing eyes. She was doing something with coins in her hands, flipping them, using them to divine something. She told me that I was destined to be a writer, and I would write things that would change the world. Perhaps it was an obvious thing for her to say because she'd seen me writing in my journal. My memory of it is so hazy--it was around twelve years ago now--but I remember inviting her up to my apartment. She was so persuasive. She clung to my arm on the walk there. When she came in, she sat on the couch and undid her braids and told me that she held much of her power in her hair. It was impressive when she let it down, as though I could feel its presence in the room. Then she started asking me for money. She was pushy, and I grew scared. I hadn't been expecting it, though it was obvious that at some point she would ask for something. I had two hundred dollars on me, but she said it wasn't enough for what she needed to do to clear me of the entities attached to me. She said that she was going to change my life, but to do that she needed at least a thousand dollars. I was hurt by the figure and asked her to leave. She persisted but eventually gave in and swiftly left the apartment, walking quickly down the long, dark hallway to the door.

"God bless you," she said before she left, and I said it back to her. I knew then that she was goodhearted, just aggressive about money. Sometimes I wondered what would have happened if I'd gone through with it.

When I was at coffee with Ariel, both of us with our elbows on the table leaning into each other, she looked in my eyes and said, "I don't know why I'm telling you this, I never tell people this. I don't like to talk about it because I feel slightly ashamed, even though it changed my life, but there's something about you that's compelling me to tell you this. I had cancer years ago and had to do chemo for treatment. The cancer went away, but the chemo made me lose my period. Then one day I was walking on the street, around here actually, in the Village, and I met this woman, who, I'm not sure how to describe her, but she was basically a Native American healer, and we did this ritual together."

As soon as she said it, I had the feeling that I knew who it was. That it was the same woman I'd met years before.

"I gave her a lot of money. I mean, $3000 dollars." She laughed.

I smiled at her.

"I think that's admirable," I said. "I love the excess of giving away $3,000 dollars. Everybody should do that at some point."

"It was $3,333," she said.

"Of course."

"But the crazy thing is that after the ritual, I got my period back for the first time in years. On Yom Kippur. I was thrilled. It was a miracle. And it's been back ever since."

"Wow," I said. "Incredible."

"She told me," Ariel said, changing her voice to a more hushed tone, "that the entity that was attached to me was a sort of demonic energy that had attached itself to my grandmother's womb and then been passed down to me."

"Oh my god," I said, and then, after a moment, "I have something I have to tell you too. I'm not even sure how to say it."

I told her my story, and it was such a synchronicity that it was as though she wasn't even surprised. It felt too fated for us to be shocked.

"Well I have to tell you something even more wild," she said. "My last girlfriend, my pisces ex, she had also met this woman on the street, right around here."

"Well it's destiny then," I said, "Us meeting."

We laughed, looking at each other as though it was the inevitable beginning of something. I'd had a glimpse of a feeling when I first saw her that I recognized her from before, from the future, or perhaps some other life. It was a feeling I'd had a few times with people who came to be very important to me. That's what was going on when she'd thought I was disappointed, or caught aback, or whatever it was that she saw on my face. I just couldn't articulate it at the time.

"After that encounter, I wasn't well. I sort of lost it and went into a dark spiral, but eventually I got much better," Ariel said. "Maybe falling into madness was me working through all of that stuff and ridding it from my system."

"I wasn't well when I met her either," I said. "In fact, after that, I sort of lost my mind too. It was during one of the worst periods of my life, after graduation. What a strange character, that woman. She's like some figure that stands at a threshold."

"Yes," Ariel said. "Some woman you meet before slipping over the edge."

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Souled Out: Brennan Vickery

Recently, viral videos have been popping up on social media of middle school-aged kids singing along to Keyshia Cole's 2005 song "Love". Perplexing… because for these kids, the heart-wrenchingly vulnerable song is quite sunny and G-rated contrasted with many R&B artists' music today, whose lyrics speak to their hazier, defeatist outlook toward love. SZA and Summer Walker boldly declare in "No Love" that "all I wanna do is fuck...get drunk…hop planes…all lust….there would be no loving you…fuck love." A far cry from the old days, when Jill Scott coos about a man's attention and self-sacrifice in "He Loves Me," subtly inciting her arousal.

To be fair, Summer Walker is expressing her frustration with a man after she had put everything into the relationship and with whom, she concedes, she was in love. But the blunt and rather nihilistic reaction of "fuck love" seems to have become more prominent in today's R&B music.

So where did the shift happen?

In the 90s, the neo-soul movement found both male and female artists grappling with the complexities of love in their music. Maxwell, Lauryn Hill, D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, and Anthony Hamilton definitely understood the hardship love brings along with it. But these were checkpoints to reflect on, look into it, or even to cry out to God for a transcendent understanding and solution– rooted in humility and the determination to "make it work." And if it didn't, this rarely turned into a call for a harsh referendum on their ex.

In 1999, *Ms.* Lauryn Hill took to the stage in Tokyo, side stepping in her heels, pouring her heart out in "Ex-Factor," accompanied by an entire backing band with singers draped in their own fashions as she cried out "I keep letting you back in/how can I explain myself/as painful as this thing has been/I just can't be with no one else." The universality of Ms. Hill's dilemma enveloped her Japanese audience–perhaps not all of them understanding the English language, but being all too familiar with the languages of love and heartbreak. And in Mary J. Blige's "Not Gon' Cry" from the *Waiting to Exhale* soundtrack, after she had been disrespected, and left with pain by a husband she committed to, she whines in the bridge "I know there are no guarantees/in love, you take your chances….".

Even the more commercially-driven songs of artists in the early to mid aughts like Chris Brown, Ashanti, Usher, and Ne-Yo featured soulful, heartfelt lyrics, production, and vocals.

It seems that R&B music shifted somewhere along the cultural faultline where Americans started to claim to be more self-aware, conscious of "protecting their peace" and blocking out "toxic" relationships–thanks in part to the mass expansion of Western talk-therapy–our secular form of salvation. And yet, despite priding ourselves for our growth in "emotional intelligence," we seem to be more apathetic and detached, averse to risk, vulnerability, and humility. We are fine with pleasure and empathy, but avoid passion and compassion. We are more interested in posturing ironically for the gram and parading our bad-bitchery than actually *seeking*, than feeling that flame which might possibly set our hearts ablaze or burn us. Better to stay cool, calm, and collected.

Put bluntly, we have sold our souls.

Our current soulless state is reflected not only in the lyrics but also in the production. Composers and producers now substitute live in-studio instruments–which require their players to have skill, passion, and dare I say, love–for speedy button-and-knob production. Vocals are often laid down apart from the production, and in the case of duets, apart from featured artists, only to be copy and pasted onto production software later on.

The trajectory of the self-proclaimed "flawless" Queen Beyonce's career epitomizes R&B's vibe shift. From her impassioned ballads and up-tempo jams in her earlier days—many of which sampled old soul hits from the 70s and 80s—where she belted about the "dangers" of being in love and the amazement of finding a lover who values her "flaws and all," to the braggadocious dominatrix singing about riding her lover's "surfbort" and demanding that her inferiors ("bitches") bow down to her–over electronically produced beats, Yonce has set the tone for other R&B singers aspiring to approach (but of course, to never reach) her status.

Ironically, it was the poor, unfortunate soul Keyshia Cole who dared to challenge Beyonce's presumptuous demand, stating "First 'women need to stick together' now bitches better bow. Smh. But it's all G! Chicks stay shooting the shit.

But when I speak my mind it's a prob." Dare we ask whether the all-powerful goddess of the industry had a hand in suppressing Keyshia's more recent tracks from making it onto the charts… "Bow Down" was the first Beyonce song to employ a curse word. After its release and the success of the entire Sasha Fierce girl-boss attitude, I started to notice other formerly clean-edited R&B singers using curse words. The curse words seemed to morph into overtly sexual lyrics, rivaling rap stars' history of sexual expression.

Not to sound like a conservative prude, but it's in the subtle innuendo where things that can't be said explicitly that sexual desire is conveyed most creatively…and seductively. Many artists–be they filmmakers, singers, or writers–of the not-too-distant past, knew this, obscuring a direct expression of sexuality but trusting the audience would feel the tenuous, illustrious reality of what is being portrayed in the art. Tennessee Williams' covert homosexual requite comes to mind.

Next's infamous song "Too Close" is a good example of an an R&B song that used double entendre as an entire motif. It is sort of a silly mental experiment to imagine how that song would be restructured today. But I'd be down to hear it.

Of course, not all R&B was a clean-cut edit. I remember my obsession with Akinyele's hot single "Put It in My Mouth" featuring Kia Jeffries's vocals which cemented the song's catchiness and success—singing along as pubescent youths about acts we had perhaps barely contemplated yet.

Granted, music has often been a means to grapple with the internal forces that wreak havoc on the soul–and quite possibly to save it from said forces. Violent rap lyrics have always been a point of contention for those who don't see music's ability to quell the propensity to commit violent acts. Listening to raunchy sexual music might simply be a way to relieve one's itchy horniness or even perverse desires, and thus abstain from indulging in the act itself. But it might also incite other listeners to actually act on those desires or actions being sung about–both violent and sexual ones. Again, the metric for such an evaluation seems elusive. But one thing seems certain: the inundation of overt sexual lyrics combined with the overproduced ambient low-beat man-hating jams may be reaching its peak. I dig the vibe, but there's a point when you reach fatigue.

Thus the irony of the slew of recent hip hop singles sampling late 90s/early 2000s R&B songs where love wasn't the archfoe or a mere transactional exchange of pleasure, but rather the goal itself. Burna Boy sampled Brandy and Toni Braxton. Drake's used Lauryn Hill and Mariah Carey tracks. Nicki Minaj looped the hook from Lumidee's (one) hit and Latto featured the chorus from Mariah's "Fantasy" on "Big Dick Energy" (catch the rhyme?"). These juxtapositions of fuck-love, or love-as-fucking, with love-love speak to our conflicted cultural moment, which possibly recognizes the emptiness of its blasé attitude toward love but can't muster up the courage–the *passion* and desire–to face the drama of love and all that it entails head on.

Music is felt. A universal language that transgresses all man-made boundaries. It may be pointless to deconstruct patterns in popular music, but as a fierce conduit for connection in the social landscape, I believe that said patterns speak—or rather, sing—volumes about our current status as a society. And if that is true, the recent obsession with Keyshia Cole's "Love"—as well as the recent hip hop tracks sampling old R&B songs, be they as they may filled with cognitive dissonance—is a promising look into what the zoomers are craving: not just revenge in response to pain associated with love, but healing, transcendence, and soullllllll.

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The Gentrification of the U F C: Alex Blum

You've probably seen the "Just Bleed" guy. Red, raging, possibly roided, the letters painted in white on his chest as he roars, spittle flying, flexing, dripping beers, for the camera at a UFC live event. He no longer watches the sport, and allegedly works as an accountant, but at the time he represented all that mixed martial arts was about—big, stupid, possibly illegal, goofball fun.

But today, you may find Mark Zuckerberg or Jared Leto cageside at a UFC event. Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla seemingly rented out (though Dana White denies it) the entire seating space for a crowdless event back in 2022. And that's a new thing as well – a *crowdless event*. It was a victory touted by Dana White from the early days of COVID, back when the UFC returned to broadcasting events after a brief pause in May 2020. The empty VyStar Veterans Memorial Arena in Jacksonville, Florida enabled the promotion to put on fights without a crowd at a time when the virus had shut down global sports.

The silent arena at first had an eerie ring of truth to it. It housed the brutal demolition of Tony Ferguson on a 12-feet win streak at the hands of Justin Gaethje, an empty arena echoing the thud of every brutal punch until the fight was waved off by veteran ref Herb Dean. Ferguson simply backed up, head shaking, trying to jolt his brain back into the fight, like an injured dog. I'd never seen anything quite like it. This fight, and the emergence of the empty arena, signaled a vibe shift in the sport. Old faces, such as Ferguson, Cowboy Cerrone, Robbie Lawler, Tyron Woodley, Frankie Edgar, and countless, countless others, were slowly withering away. And they were doing so at the same time when the UFC Apex emerged, a small facility attached to the UFC's Performance Institute in Las Vegas.

The Apex contains a smaller cage than a typical full-crowd arena, and worse cards. The Apex has become notorious in recent years for housing the UFC's least-stacked events in an overstocked calendar, due to their commitment to putting on a minimum threshold of fight cards annually as part of their broadcast deal with Disney's ESPN. Fight nights, previously a marquee feature of the sport, always in a new town somewhere in America, whether Sioux Falls, South Dakota, or Boise, Idaho, put the UFC on the road. They brought fights to small towns across America, showcasing top talent and occasionally even title fights outside of big-ticket PPVs. Multiple ranked fighters often appeared on these cards. They were a core piece of the product.

But since 2020, that has changed. The Apex in Las Vegas, capable of holding only a minimal crowd for fighters' families and celebrity guests, has held nearly one-hundred events in the past four years, typically half the promotion's shows in a given month. Full live crowds are back for pay-per-views and select cities (Nashville, San Diego, etc.), but smaller markets like Sioux Falls and Boise are out for good. Gone, too, are most of the big names. Fight nights are now headlined by up-and-coming talent, sometimes ranked outside the top ten, often with no other ranked fighters on the card. Dana White, ostensibly a conservative who relished in rejecting elite consensus by putting on fights in early 2020, clings to this watered-down, COVID-created minimal-crowd model, depriving middle America of shows on the road and putting on main events no one would buy tickets to see.

While it is tempting to blame such a decline in color, spectacle, and overall joy on late capitalism, the reality is more like late managerialism. Just as J. Robert Oppenheimer would have been denied credentials

to work on the Manhattan Project in today's governmental hierarchy, large organizations in phases of extended success begin to tamp down on innovation, novelty, and interesting ideas, and settle into the deeply-worn grooves which have generated either do-nothing jobs or shareholder value. "Move fast and break things" rapidly becomes a minor iteration on the same repetitive gadgets. Even the most radical innovations, such as the Apple Vision Pro VR goggles, just pick up the regular internet and place it "closer" to the user. The main application of AI so far is just better Google Search and lower quality junk images, videos, and the continued Wikipedia-fication of human knowledge.

As the UFC has aged, it has simplified, cut originality, and simply stripped down the product. Fighters can't have sponsorships on their shorts, earning less opportunities to be paid. Uniforms created by one corporate sponsorship that pays the promotion, not the fighters, are mandated. The Rock's signature shoe is introduced, following the same playbook–paying the company centrally, not the fighters. Bizarre spectacles like "UFC: Fight for the Troops" events, spectated by thousands of soldiers in camouflage, are unlikely to return. Multi-city press conference tours like Conor McGregor vs Jose Aldo simply don't happen anymore. Seasonal press conferences showcasing dozens of fighters lined up for the coming months also don't occur. In-Octagon face-offs to set up future fights are few and far between, press conferences at events are shorter and more constrained, and the promotion usually announces main events just a couple of months before they're scheduled, a far cry from the pre-COVID schedule often laid out half-a-year in advance. The company is coasting. The bells and whistles are no longer needed.

The United States may still be driven by bread and circus, but the circus is dryer, smaller than it once was. Beach cities in California are often ghost towns on Friday nights. Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts are really easy to watch, even when you know they're bad. Quality doesn't matter. Rather, *consistency* does. More, lower-quality fight cards. More, lower-quality content. As long as it's there, it's doing its job. Who cares who's on the card? Be grateful for the *content*. Quality is negotiable.

The thing-in-itself is enough. Its exact composition hardly matters. Like a priest getting up for his five-hundred-and-fiftieth sermon, it's easy to coast. After all, what matters is that something is said. The specifics of what is said can be figured out in post-production.

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It's (not) a Party in the USA: Germán Saucedo

In Latin America, it is socially expected that a young, private-school-type with disposable income (aka access to dad's money) go to dance clubs or *antros*, as they are known here. This was unfortunate for me during high school and college, as I've never particularly enjoyed clubbing. However, not being one to deviate from the norm, I regularly went along, spending an ill-considered amount of money for bottle and table service, permanently damaging my eardrums with *reggaeton* booming out of speakers that seemed as loud as a jet engine, and inevitably having fun. For this reason, despite my predisposition against clubs and loud parties, I've often found myself looking for one when traveling abroad.

A few years ago, I visited a cousin who was spending a semester at Berkeley. The college's reputation as a bastion for liberality and progressiveness awakened a desire for a party in me, and I believed the famously raucous university would have no trouble fulfilling my desires. I was thoroughly disappointed. On the first night, we scoured the infamous Telegraph Avenue in search of revelry, which unfortunately came to us only in the form of shuffleboard inside the one bar that opened after 10:00 PM. Suffice it to say, it was pretty dead. After being summarily defeated in shuffleboard many times by the few enthusiastic regulars, we continued our search. Having found none of the craziness I had hoped for, and having drunk one beer too many, I resorted, to the dismay of my cousin, to join a group of protesters who were yelling outside of the Asian studies building at 2:00 AM for some reason.

Hopes were high for day two, since we were invited to attend a pre-game party with members of various fraternities. However, instead of witnessing the type of event that is regularly associated with the American university experience thanks to movies like *Neighbors*, *22 Jump Street,* and *Spring Breakers*, I found myself in the middle of an environment of sad debauchery that is difficult to describe. There was certainly plentiful booze and loud music, but nobody seemed to be having any real fun. With every "woo", be it from the men or the women, the true nature of the melancholic ambiance became more and more self-evident. The pop hits that were loudly playing did not lend themselves to dancing. The men seemed afraid of the women, who were scantily clad but lacked any grace or attractiveness whatsoever. To compensate for the lack of flirtation, the attendants resorted to endless shots, and, even though it was barely noon, a visit to the bathroom entailed solving a maze of piss and vomit. That day, I was offered cocaine a total of three times, which is three times more than I had ever been offered beforehand.

When partying in the USA, one seems to be stuck between a choice of a Project X-type situation and a pizza get-together at your local church's basement. It may be true that I'm particularly bad at finding a fun party, but I'm also far from the first person to point out this dichotomy of boredom and off-putting licentiousness in American parties, clubs, or bars.

Sometimes, a party that is both boring and excessive can happen in the same place and time. Once, after spending the day skiing in one of America's most popular and crowded ski towns, a small group of friends and I decided to search for a bar to get a drink. This group included a family member who was a certified expert in having a good time, as was evidenced to me on a trip to Switzerland a few years before. In spite of his expertise, and being a town filled with hundreds of young people, we were only able to find one bar that was open and that wouldn't let us order more than one drink per hour. The bar was almost empty except for yet another shuffleboard (the bane of my existence). After a while, a couple of hooligans, who had definitely had more than alcohol, entered the bar and started accosting the bartender. Everyone was kicked out and the bar was forced to close within fifteen minutes.

For foreigners, be they European or Latin American, the United States has long been one of the worst countries to have fun in. Normally, when making a "Eurotrip" itinerary, cities and locations that would otherwise be ignored by regular tourists are swarmed upon by international legions of recent high school graduates. The segment of the American population composed of young, college-aged kids with money seems to agree with the European and Latin American sentiment concerning parties, as they have abandoned Florida's party scene for the beaches and clubs of Mexico, Spain, and Greece. Even places like Sin City or Miami, which have built a reputation as places of fun, are no longer considered meccas for national or international partying, given that they've become gaudy and déclassé.

A regular American may be indifferent to foreigners' opinions about their parties. Nevertheless, asking why the current state of affairs is as it is can give us valuable insight into American youth culture, and can provide us with a possible path towards diminishing the deadly atomization many young people suffer from in the United States. There are many reasons (which we won't detail here) why Americans seem to be trapped in this dichotomy of debauchery and boredom. Their strange relationship with alcohol could be counted among them, as Americans have never been able to truly shake off a social stigma associated with it, leaving them to over-indulge in it or avoid it completely. Another may be their avoidance of unnecessary physical contact, which has led to a historically prohibitive attitude toward dancing, or an exciting feeling of taboo-breaking whenever one allows himself to participate in it. *Footloose* was popular for a reason.

Letting loose on a whim is one of the hardest things a person can attempt to do, similar to someone purposely trying to think of nothing. The effort put into "letting loose" and the nature of the act in itself are in contradiction, which is why it is generally accepted knowledge that a party cannot be forced; one must fall into one, so to speak. What will a group fall into when letting loose? The essence of a community's culture may provide an answer. Latin culture, for better or worse, finds at its base a laid-back predisposition with fluctuating bouts of spectacle. It's no wonder then that Latins find it easy to "fall into" a party. WASPs, on the other hand, generally require an effort to escape their culture's base instinct of propriety and conscientiousness, which, to be fair, has given them economic supremacy on the world stage.

Whatever the cause, I invite them to take a trip down to Mexico to learn a thing or two from us about how to have spontaneous, revelrous fun. These days, we could all benefit from it.

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